

Imagining Solutions-Driven Community Centers

Planet Texas 2050

By Marla Torrado and Nicole Joslin



We work at the [Austin Community Design and Development Center](#) (ACDDC), where our work focuses on affordable housing development and community initiatives that contribute to a healthy and equitable built environment. We want to emphasize the ‘community’ aspect of what we do, because we work alongside residents and the place-based organizations that serve them to ensure local voices are included in local planning, design, and implementation processes.

For a good part of our existence, [ACDDC](#) has focused mostly on offering green building and architectural services to affordable housing providers of all types for developments of all sizes. In offering these services, we’ve made it a priority to partner directly with Austin residents because we believe that local improvements should be *by* and *for* the communities that are being affected.

But when we began this work more than a decade ago, there was a clear gap when it came to affordable housing design and development: green features and sustainable practices simply weren’t considered a necessity for that market. Our goal was to fill that gap.



ACDDC [specializes in services](#) that range from construction project management and zoning assessment to policy work and architectural design.

Fortunately, as time passed, green building design started to become the norm around Austin, and that includes housing that serves some of our most vulnerable residents. In fact, many architectural firms around the city began offering their green design services to affordable housing providers, pro bono in many cases! We saw this as a great win for Austin’s affordable housing community. Since this gap seemed to be on its way to being bridged, we decided to look for other areas that needed attention.

We’d noticed that a lot of the work we were involved with placed us in a ‘connector’ position. We had relationships with local communities and other neighborhood-based organizations, as well as with different city departments, educational institutions, and public and private stakeholders. Because of those relationships, we found that we could keep one group updated about another or make sure this partner knew about the programs and services that another organization was offering. At the same time, we were able to talk directly with city departments on a community’s behalf to let them know what their housing needs were as well as the obstacles they were facing when trying to meet those needs.

However, we found that our community partners seemed more inclined to discuss their issues with us rather than calling a city office directly. In thinking about the complexities of these relationships and how they have been affected and shaped by a very specific history of exclusion, institutional racism and oppression in Austin, we began to see that it might be useful to have a community-owned space that could act as community resource center, or what we call a solutions-driven community center.

What if there were a community storefront with a mission to connect residents with organizations and stakeholders that can assist them in co-creating solutions for the challenges they face? What if this storefront were led by the community and for the community, providing space for conversation and partnership?

As we were having these internal conversations, a couple of things developed that were completely in line with the idea of a solutions-driven community center. First, we were finalizing a project in the [Montopolis neighborhood](#), where we had been asked by the Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corporation to analyze the need for affordable rental and homeownership opportunities in the community. We talked to many residents and community leaders, which shed light on their biggest concerns.

One issue, in particular, was that many residents weren’t aware of programs that could help them resist the pressure to move or be displaced. For example, residents were concerned about increasing property taxes that could potentially price them out of their own homes, but many people, especially senior citizens, didn’t know about the over-65 homestead exemption that could offer some financial relief. This is a significant and important gap, given that this exemption could be the difference between a family staying in their home or leaving.

Residents expressed interest in some sort of center that could help connect them with programs and services while providing a way for residents to help shape new policies that could better address their needs. We were excited to see how the conversations we were having at our office were now taking place out in the community — their thought process was mirroring ours. Once our initial project with the Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corporation was complete, we began to meet with those Montopolis residents who’d also imagined the benefits of having a solutions-driven community center in their neighborhood.

Around the same time, we met [Planet Texas 2050](#) researchers from UT Austin who were concerned about the general disconnect between academic institutions and the communities they serve. Planet Texas 2050 wants to find solutions to climate-based challenges that will most certainly worsen over time as our state’s population grows.

How can university researchers work alongside communities to solve everyday problems? How can researchers share findings so that residents and local organizations can use them in real ways, right away?

Again, these questions seemed to point to a solutions-driven community center. We have since collaborated with the Planet Texas 2050 team to ensure that these researcher/community relationships are established in a way that is socially and culturally appropriate while fostering long-term partnerships that benefit everyone.

The solutions-driven community center idea is new for us and our partners but seems to be bridging a gap that we have all identified through our own experiences — from the community side, our non-profit space, in local government, and at the university level. The idea is to keep working together to see how this model can help improve communication across all these sectors, but most important, our goal is to find collaborative solutions to pressing real-life challenges. We are excited to see where this takes us!

Please join us on this journey.

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[Nicole Joslin](#) is ACDDC’s executive director. Her professional and academic background spans architecture, development, disaster recovery, and community engaged-design. After working for Architecture for Humanity’s Hurricane Katrina recovery program in Biloxi, MS, Nicole moved to Austin and co-founded Women.Design.Build to provide more opportunities for women to engage in community-driven design and construction activities. She concurrently practiced at architecture firm BOKA Powell and received her architectural license in 2012. Nicole’s experience contributed to her research on the role of community organizations in disaster preparedness and recovery in the Community and Regional Planning graduate program at the University of Texas.